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ABSTRACT

A certification program was designed to provide specialized knowledge and skills courses for future public child welfare workers in Kentucky. The program involves 6 hours of course work, delivered via distance education, and an intense practicum in local offices. Incentives for program participation included special consideration for hiring by the state department of protective services. An evaluation of the program was conducted via semi-structured interviews with graduates. Findings indicate that the goal of recruiting more professional workers was met. The goal of retaining workers had mixed success; most graduates indicated they would stay with the department long enough to get their master's degree, a few said they would work for the department until retirement, and a couple claimed that if the system did not change to enable them to serve families better, they would leave. Graduates started their jobs ready to work, but some felt that ongoing supervision and mentoring were still needed. The program provided well-trained people committed to families and children, but high caseloads and heavy paperwork interfered with adequate provision of family protection. All graduates acknowledged that no one group of people could protect families from abuse without community involvement. Graduates found the distance learning technology intimidating at first, but on-site instructors helped them deal with it. All agreed that the practicum was key to program success. More training in court behavior was recommended. (TD)

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TRAINING FOR PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKERS IN RURAL EASTERN KENTUCKY

PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
PCWCP

BY

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TRAINING PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKERS IN THE STATE OF KENTUCKY

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TRAINING FOR PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE WORKERS IN RURAL EASTERN KENTUCKY

Background:

Child maltreatment is not a new phenomenon. However, considering the victimization of children as a problem that needs societal intervention is a recent social concept (Miller-Perrin, 1999). States have struggled for years to try and find ways to help families and protect children in those families where violence or neglect put the children at significant risk (Fox, Burnham, and Miller, 1997).

Like other states the state of Kentucky has grappled with the problem of how **to hire and retain qualified** workers needed to work with families and protect children. This problem is complicated in the Appalachian area of Eastern Kentucky. In Eastern Kentucky jobs are scarce and "state" jobs are attractive because they are stable and offer fringe benefits (health insurance and retirement benefits). Thus, some enter Protective Service who do not posses the skills or attitudes necessary to really help families. Until recently (1999) Child Protective workers were hired on the basis of their placement on a merit exam, which had little to do with the tasks, required by protective workers. Only persons with undergraduate degrees in Social Work, Sociology, Psychology and related degrees (in Eastern Kentucky undergraduate degrees in almost any field were accepted) were allowed to take the Protective Service Exam. Employees did not have the necessary skills to perform their job upon accepting a position with Community Based Service (Protective Service). Thus the State created a Training Branch whose function was to train new employees and update older employees. Although the training gained praise nationally and was seen as a model for other states, new employees were absent from work for much of the first

six months of employment in training and unavailable to perform their job (Fox, Burnham and Miller, 1997).

Then in 1994, Wayne County social workers (none were social workers by training. Local news papers refered to them as social workers) were the first protective service workers to be indicted on charges of complicity in the murder of a child in their care (Goodwin, 1994). An infant was physically abused by his father and died. The "social workers" were found not guilty of complicity to commit murder but the case upset the already low morale of workers throughout the State. Workers felt they were blamed for conditions that they had no control over, while other professions involved (judges and police officers) had immunity when dealing with child abuse cases.

In April 1996 Dr. Miller, Cabinet Secretary of Family and Children Services visited the Spring meeting of Kentucky Social Work Educators and asked the group to create a state wide Public Child Welfare Certification Program that would (1) recruit the most professional persons, (2) help retain them, (3) have them start their job at a local Community Base Service office "job ready" and (4) help protect children and families in Kentucky.

Development of Pilot Program:

The Director of Eastern Kentucky University's Social Work Program, Doug Burnham and the Director of Eastern Kentucky University Training Consortium, Steve Fox, decided that they would submit a grant application to the Federal Government creating a pilot project that would serve as a model for training undergraduate social work students for work as child protective workers. They presented their idea at a Kentucky Association of Social Work Educators meeting and five other universities signed on to be part of the pilot program.

Social Work Programs have consistently provided students with an excellent generalist foundation. However the state's public child welfare agencies were interested in employing beginning workers with a higher skill level in the actual delivery of services than BSW programs provided. Thus the Public Child Welfare Workers Certification Program was designed to provide specialized knowledge and skills courses for future public child welfare workers. The program also included an intense Practicum in Community Based local offices. Students who successfully completed the program were given special consideration for hiring by the Department (considered first over applicants who had not completed the certification program and came in at a higher salary than regular new workers).

The Certification required six hours of course work in specially designed social work electives. These six hours (two courses) were designed in collaboration with the six universities and trainers from the State Department Training Branch. Then the courses were taught via compress video at each university site. An instructor was on site in each classroom and prepared to teach each evening if the video compressed equipment did not work. However, when the equipment worked the instructor with the most expertise on the topic covered would teach from their site.

Community Base Supervisors received special training in order to have a PCWCP Practicum student. Students and supervisors were given a list of activities and tasks they were to complete prior to completion of the Practicum. During the Practicum semester students attended some additional training offered for new employees. In those trainings students were able to assess if what they had learned in classes coincided with what trainers were providing new employees. They got to interact with new employees and hear first hand what working for the Cabinet was like.

Students had to apply for admission into the PCWC program. The material requested (example, written paper on why they wanted to work in child welfare, and reference letters) was similar to what was needed to apply to most BSW programs in the State. Two major additional requirements were (1) a background criminal check and (2) a group interview with at least one representative from the University and at least one representative from a regional Community Bases Service office.

There were a number of incentives offered to students for successfully participating in the program. Students could earn four semesters of paid tuition, plus a stipend during each Spring and Fall semester. After successfully completing the entire program and graduating with a BSW these students were given special consideration as far as hiring (if a county they wanted to work in had an opening- they were hired). When hired they were hired in at the 2nd merit level because they had completed the first six months of new worker training and could carry a caseload immediately.

The pilot project ended in May of 1999 and the second group of Public Child Welfare Certification students were admitted Fall of 1999. Applications are now being accepted for the third group of participants. A couple of research studies have been completed on the graduates of the pilot program. Initial results are reported in the next section.

Research Methodology:

The University of Louisville Kent School of Social Work conducted both qualitative and quantitative research to measure the effectiveness of the pilot program graduates and compared their results with other hirers for the Cabinet (Miller, Fox and Burnham, 1999).

In order to measure the success of the PCWCP program for the six participants from Morehead State University an Oral History Interview was conducted with each graduate. The interview that was conducted was semi-structured. There were few specific questions asked, rather participants were asked to relate their experience with PCWCP from when they first heard of the program to their present employment in chronological order (see interview letter).

Research Findings: University of Louisville Kent School of Social Work;

All students who successfully completed the PCWCP were employed by Community Based Services. Only one such graduate did not make it past the six-month probationary period. The PCWCP students scored significantly higher than other new employees did on training pre and post knowledge exams (Miller, Fox and Burnham, 1999).

In structured interviews with supervisors who had hired the graduates of the pilot PCWC program they rated PCWCP students on 26 specific job behaviors on a 1to 5 scale. Graduates were ranked on attitude, relationship skills, safety, permanency planning, and execution of best practice in areas of intake, investigations, ongoing treatment and court behavior. The supervisors ranked graduates behavior very high with an overall average of 4.6 (Miller, Fox and Burnham, 1999).

Research Findings: University of Morehead Oral History Interview

All of the participants found out about the program from hearing about it from a professor. This professor presented the information in a class that they were all members of.

They decided to apply for a variety of reasons. One said she always wanted to be a social worker and thought this would be a good place to start thus gaining true generalist knowledge of what social work was all about. She also indicated that having a guaranteed job did not hurt because one does not have that with the BSW degree. Another admitted the main reason for her initial interest was the free tuition. She had received no financial help with her college expenses and her debts were growing. Another had an interest in the subject of incest and was doing some work for a professor on that topic (for a paper) and he mentioned that maybe she should apply for the PCWCP. Another indicated when she started the BSW she wanted to be a therapist, but as she continued her schooling she came to understand that might not be the best place for her talents and she decided to go with public child welfare because she wanted to help children. She felt it was easier to try and help a child rather than wait until they were adults to intervene. Another student's own personal experience growing up (with abuse) gave her the desire to work in the field, so she could make a difference.

When talking with the graduates about the two specialized courses they all indicated they liked them and learned a lot. They found the video compressed media intimidating in the beginning but by the end they just ignored it. One acknowledged she thought; "using distance learning equipment was the only way that you could get training from so many experts across the states. No one institution could hire all those experts". They all credited their on site instructor with helping them deal with the technology and making the course a successful learning experience. Some felt the courses covered too much content, but even they said when they started their job they realized there was even more content to learn so they were not sure what you could do about that. In fact one graduate even said; "there was no way any one could cover everything a person needed to know for the job. Some of the material had to be learned by dealing with cases." Two students

indicated the second course was redundant of the first and needed to be more skills oriented.

Graduates made some suggestions for improvement for the courses. Most indicated more need for information on the court system, and how it operates and the legal jargon needed. Many felt more training on how to testify was needed. Three students indicated more was needed on ongoing case management or treatment plans. More examples of real cases and how workers have assisted families would have helped.

Two students mentioned a need to learn how to connect with clients and motivate them when they see no need for change and do not want you in their life. One student said; "I am good, maybe the best in the office on intake and initial case plans, but I did not know what to do with a client after that." We need more training on what the options are after you have a client on your caseload, what are the resources in your community?" Some recommend that a new mentoring project that was being started for new employees who do not go through the PCWCP be something they get to participate in too. "No matter how well you are trained when the 'responsibility' is on you, you need help learning how to deal with that," was a comment made by one graduate.

When graduates were asked how they felt about attending training with new employees there were mixed reactions. Some felt a little awkward; because they worried some of the employees wondered why they were there when they were still students. "It felt like we were showing off when we knew how to do something or knew the information trainers were providing and new employees did not". Most students found they were more up to date on the material presented than even employees who had worked with the department for some time. That made them feel good about the education they were getting. One student felt most of the training was redundant because the material was covered in the two special

classes. However all the graduates were glad they got to attend training because they got to network with new workers. They were able to find out from them what it really was like to be a new worker. Also they were able informally to find out what different offices were like so they could use that information when it came to applying for Practicum and jobs.

For most graduates the Practicum was the high light of the PCWCP experience. But the main factor mentioned as to how successfully a Practicum was depended on the supervision provided. For graduates who had little supervision or guidance or who were not allowed to do many things it was really frustrating. Fortunately most of the graduates had excellent Practicum experiences. In discussion with graduates about what made a Practicum work one graduate said of her supervisor; "She pushed me out there. She would always tell me what she was doing, and why she was doing it. It was not so much what she taught me, but that she also taught me how to survive in this job." The supervisor was not the only factor that insured a successful Practicum experience. How the rest of the office staff and other professions accepted a student also effected Practicum outcome. Students own initiative was another factor that effected outcome. One graduate said; "I was my own best advocate. If my supervisor was busy I would go to someone else and asked if I could tag along. I did not stand around and read a lot. " Another factor that indicated Practicum success was how much a student was allowed to do. For those students who were assigned their own case (with supervision) that seem to be a more satisfying learning experience than just following other workers around as they did their work. Getting to experience a wide range of work activities (from intake, to case planning to court etc.) also helped shape the learning experience for students. One graduate said, "the Practicum should give students a good feel for what they will be doing on the job."

Another thing mentioned by a couple of graduates that was needed in the Practicum was honest feedback from supervisors. It was upsetting to find out that supervisors at times were not pleased with their behavior. Especially when the supervisor never confronted them directly about that. Open honest communication was necessary on the part of the supervisor.

Students all agreed the Practicum was a key to the PCWCP success. They made the following suggestions for insuring other students have a profitable Practicum experience. (1) Students should have some say in Practicum supervisor and they should meet the supervisor and ascertain if the (supervisor) really has time to spend with the student. (2) Create a list of activities that students should gain experience in while in the Practicum. Provide both student and supervisor with the list. Students need exposure to a wide range of worker activities. (3) Make sure Practicum supervisors understand the PCWCP training and are committed to facilitating student growth by providing quality supervision and mentoring (this must include honest communication). (4) Supervisors can not provide all the guidance needed to a student, thus Practicum should take place in offices where other workers wish to help shape the learning experience for students.

Getting Hired:

When graduates spoke of getting hired by the Department of Community Bases Services, it was clear there was no clear pattern. Their experiences were very different. One graduate had a job offer and started to work a month after graduation. Two graduates had job offers within two or three months of graduation. The rest took longer to get hired and they experienced more stress and anxiety over the hiring process. Two graduates handled it by sending out resumes, contacting supervisors personally, visiting offices they wanted to be employed at and adding to the number of

counties they were willing to work in. The main difference between the students who were employed rather quickly and those that were not was the frustration and anger the latter felt. They took the Department's commitment to hire them to mean that they would be hired quickly (quickly was not 5 or 7 months for them), but 5 to 7 months was really quickly for State Government. Graduates indicated in the interview that students should be told it might take awhile for the State to hire them.

One graduate said, "students need to understand that the recommendation their Practicum supervisor gives after they have completed their BSW degree is the key to whether they get hired." Most supervisors know each other. They attend a lot of training's together and work together with each other on committees so they check with each other when they are considering hiring a PCWCP student and a bad recommendation can mean that you do not get called for a job interview.

On The Job Reality -"When the rubber meets the road."

When questioned about the reality of the job answers varied. One graduate who has been working only four months felt she was pretty much prepared for the reality of the job. She did indicate that; "I was so well prepared and warned about the job realities that you almost start your job burned out. You know it is going to be a very difficult job." She also had the smallest case load (seven cases). Other workers said that; "Nothing prepares you for when the responsibility is yours. When someone's life depends on you." One participant said the biggest difference from school and job was "the responsibility. In Practicum I was responsible for what I learned but my supervisor was responsible for what I did. However, when I got my first referral. It was like a weight came over me. I have to actually do this job." Others expressed frustration with the reality of the job. One even said; "you ruined us." You taught use how it should be done. I believe in that, but

in the real world you do not have the time to do things the way we were taught in classes." Another participant said, "they do not really want social workers here. I look at the big picture, like you taught us. I see all these things that could be done. But here I am told; focus on the referral and substantiate or not. They really do not want us to substantiate, they want the problem fixed in 30 days and no case opened." A number of graduates talked of the number of cases and the large amount of paper work. Some indicated there was no way you could do everything the State wanted you to do. One graduate also said that Twist (the computer system that had to be used for case entry) was not user friendly and was part of the problem. It added to the amount of time needed to do paper work.

With one exception all of the graduates found the job even more difficult than they imagined. All were still committed to the job, but a couple said that if things did not change so that they really could do more for and with families they probably would not stay with the Department until they retire. All of the graduates indicated they wanted to get their Masters degree and they would stay to take advantage of the Departments program that helped with that.

Meeting The Four Goals:

(1)Recruiting Highly Professional Persons:

The first goal of the PCWCP was to attract more professional workers. There was unanimous agreement that the program did that. A couple of graduates said; "I do not know how anyone does this job without the training we had." A few of the PCWCP graduates worked in offices where other persons had been hired at the same time they were or after and those people were often still in training and did not have a case load. All graduates were carrying caseloads. All had received their first case within two weeks of starting their employment with the Department.

(2)Retaining Workers

A few graduates indicated they would work for the Department until retirement. They were that committed to the their job and the work they did. Most indicated they probably would stay long enough to get their Masters Degree. However, a couple indicated that if the system did not change so they would be better able to serve families or if they got to the point they felt they were not helping families they would leave.

Most of the lack of commitment to staying with the job was due to the frustration with the job. Many of the graduates were overwhelmed with the demands of the job. The paper work and high caseloads were interfering with their ability to do what they wanted to do to help families. They had not lost their commitment to help families, just the opposite, they were frustrated with the reality of their job in which they were unable to provide the help families needed. One graduate suggested that; "if Family Support (food stamp etc) personnel had BSW's and would provide more services then some of the abuse might be avoided. " She went on to say; " that side of our office sees our clients long before we do and if more support and resources were provided then maybe we could prevent some abuse and reduce our case load."

(3)Have Workers Start Their Job Ready To Do The Job

As already indicated graduates unanimously indicated they did not know how people did their job without the training that was provided in the PCWCP. Some had even experienced starting work with others that had not been in the program and those people had to attend the trainings the State provided (thus not being available for work). All graduates had cases within two weeks of starting work. They were handling difficulty cases (two had already done sexual abuse investigations).

While the program did help them start the job with the many of the skills needed to do the job, all agreed that no training could teach you everything you had to learn. Much of the learning comes from actually having to do the job. Some graduates wished they had a little more time to ease into the job and could participate in the mentoring program that was being created for new employees who had not gone through the PCWCP. They also felt ongoing supervision and mentoring was needed to help them know how to deal with the overwhelming "responsibilities" (having to make decisions that effect other persons lives in a significant manner) they have with the job.

(4)Help protect Children and Families in Kentucky

All of the graduates answered this question carefully. They "qualified" their answer. They all implied that if having people well trained, committed to families and children could protect children then the program was doing a good job of that. However all of the graduates realized that even if you had the most qualified persons, no one group of people could protect families from abuse. Abuse and neglect is a community problem and until the community becomes involved and committed to finding a solution no one profession can or will solve the problem.

A number of graduates indicated that with the high case load and heavy paper work demanded that they did not have time to do what even they had been trained to do well. Corners had to be cut just in order to see all the families a worker had to work with and meet the deadlines imposed. So until the legislature is willing to commit more funds to provide more workers, families can not be adequately protected from abuse in Kentucky.

Some graduates went a step further and said that the way the job was structured was part of the problem. When a person goes in and does a careful assessment and realizes what a family needs is resources and support and the agency does not have the means to provide them, then how can one say you are protecting children and preventing abuse. The Department becomes part of the problem and it becomes one of the reasons families are not protected in Kentucky. One graduate presented an example of this; after working with a client she realized the mother was motivated but needed parenting classes. The mother received welfare payments and needed to work in order to keep them. The only time parenting classes were offered were during the day. She could not tell the mother to miss work to attend classes; thus both the worker and the mother were between a rock and hard place. Who's fault was it the mother could not get to the classes she needed to help protect her child?

Conclusion:

One author who has written about the need for a change in higher education is James Fairweather (1996). He speaks of the changing nature of society and the nature of work and the need for higher education to change to meet the changing nature of work. He calls for increasing access, improving instructional quality and enhancing student learning. The model presented here is an example of way to do such. It may be a suggestion for the future of Higher Education. As one graduate said not every University can hire all the experts the state has, using distance learning is a method of providing students at different locations access to these experts. When employers like the State Government complain about hiring college graduates and then turning around and providing six months of training before they can do the job, this is a method (collaboration with the employer) of dealing with this issue. It meets the employers need but does not violate the Universities responsibility to educate for a much border world than

just one job. Graduates in this research study unanimously agreed the PCWCP enhanced learning.

This instruction method described within is not cheap. Each site had both an instructor and coordinator for the program. Expenses could be reduced by not having an instructor at each site. However, the preliminary research indicates the on-site instructor was instrumental in mentoring and modeling and without that contact the pilot program would not have been as successful.

Each time the courses are taught extensive meetings (with instructors and State trainers) had to be held to assure that students would receive the most up to date training. Thus the collaboration needs to be on going. This can be time consuming

During the second round of instruction some changes were made. These changes were the result of the feedback from graduates. The content in the first class was reduced to a more manageable amount. The second class was changed to make it more skills oriented and material on testifying in court was added. The number of addition trainings that students had to attend was reduced.

Also in the second round an interesting philosophical dilemma surfaced– the difference between training and education. When students were being taught how to do assessment reports two faculty (University faculty not adjuncts hired to teach the course) noticed that what was being taught was what the Cabinet was doing, not best practice for assessment, that was being taught in core BSW classes dealing with assessment skills. This brings up the issue of what is the purpose of a college degree is it to teach students to do what the employer wants or is it to teach students to critically think about what they are asked to do and encourage them to find the most effective way to accomplish their goals. This paper will not answer this question but it does suggest a way to address it. Since students can get the Certification only if

enrolled in a BSW program hopefully they are learning what their future employer wants of them and at the same time developing the skills to go beyond that and change and shape their future agency in a more positive manner.

Future Research:

Much more research is needed before one could conclude the significance of the results presented here. On going research is needed to assure that the program continues to meet the needs of students, employers, universities and the families and children designed to serve.

An even more difficult question that needs to be researched is; whether this program is sufficient enough to protect families from abuse. The initial response of graduates was; "no" unless community wide changes are made. Also, some student's responses seem to support Michael Shapiro's conclusion in Solomon's Sword (1999) that the myth that drives most Protective Workers is that they can protect children from the "bad acts" of their parents. It would be interesting to see if research would support or invalidate Solomon's conclusion that children **can not** be protected from their parent's "bad acts."

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This is an unstructured interview. But it would be helpful if you could relate your experience with PCWCP in chronological order. Start with when you first hear about the program and proceed to the present.

Heard about PCWCP

Decided to apply

Getting accepted as PCWCP student

Two-distance learning courses

Technology as tool for learning

Trainings

Practicum

Getting Hired

Reality after being employed

Goal or purpose of PCWCP

1. Recruit qualified professionals
2. Have them trained in the skills that they will need for the job, so they can start work ready to take on a case load
3. Retain workers
4. Protect families and children

PCWCP

SIX PARTICIPATING UNIVERSITES

JOINT (faculty and agency trainers) development of undergraduate curricula for two child welfare courses

USE OF COMMOM SYLLABI, TESTS AND TEXTS at all universities

UNIVERSITY FACULTY AS PRIMARY INSTRUCTORS augmented by agency trainers

SIMULTANEOUS DELIVERY OF COURSES (via interactive television)

SPECIAL TRAINING FOR AGENCY PRACTICUM DIRECTORS

REQUIREMENT OF SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF AGNECY CORE COMPETENCY (first six month of training)